DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 448 243 UD 033 902

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TITLE The Technical, Cultural, and Political Factors in College Preparation Programs for Urban and Minority Youth. ERIC Digest Number 158.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, New York, NY.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-UD-00-7
ISSN ISSN-0889-8049
PUB DATE 2000-11-00
NOTE 4p.
CONTRACT ED-99-CO-0035
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027. Tel: 800-601-4868 (Toll Free); For full text: http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu.
PUB TYPE ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Education; *College Preparation; *Cultural Awareness; Disadvantaged Youth; *High School Students; High Schools; *Minority Groups; *Program Effectiveness; Urban Schools; *Urban Youth
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This digest describes the essential components of college preparation programs for urban and minority youth. The digest suggests that such programs must attend to the cultural norms of the community and their own political contexts in order to increase students' access to, enrollment in, and graduation from college. College preparation programs must begin for students as early as possible, focus on readiness rather than remediation, and provide multiple services over an extended period of time. The technical components of precollege programs cover the structures, strategies, and knowledge necessary to prepare students for admission, enrollment, and graduation from college. College preparation must be more than a series of well-orchestrated mechanical and sequential services. It is an inherently complex and value-laden process. Attention must be paid to the inextricably intertwined technical, cultural, and political components to create not only well-intentioned but well-planned and implemented programs that can change the landscape of postsecondary attainment for minority youth from low-income neighborhoods. (SLD)

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ED 448 243

THE TECHNICAL, CULTURAL, AND POLITICAL FACTORS IN COLLEGE PREPARATION PROGRAMS FOR URBAN AND MINORITY YOUTH

DIGEST NUMBER 158, EDO-UD-00-7, NOVEMBER 2000

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UD033902

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION

DIGEST

Number 158, November 2000 EDO-UD-00-7 ISSN 0889 8049

THE TECHNICAL, CULTURAL, AND POLITICAL FACTORS IN COLLEGE PREPARATION PROGRAMS FOR URBAN AND MINORITY YOUTH

The need to develop college preparation programs for minority youth living in low-income neighborhoods has been gaining momentum due to recent policy and statistical trends. The number of Asian American, Latino, and African American students enrolled in higher education has increased, but not in proportion to the increase in these groups at large in the United States; the gap between the number of white students and the number of African American and Latino students has actually grown, with socioeconomic status the greatest determinant of college enrollment and persistence for all students. Moreover, current policies at state universities pose access threats to urban and minority youth (Fenske, Geranios, Keller, & Moore, 1997). And, finally, it is probable that newly-passed legislation to deny affirmative action and eliminate remediation programs in higher education in states such as California, New York, Texas, and Washington will restrict rather than expand access (Tierney & Jun, n.d.).

Numerous programs have been implemented in schools and colleges across the country to increase post-secondary attainment—access to, enrollment in, and graduation from college—for urban and minority youth. However, little research has been compiled to determine whether any particular program components are vital to the success of these programs (Tierney & Jun, n.d.). Thus, the solution to helping these students through the academic pipeline to post-secondary attainment is often limited to creation of a program with a set of specific components, such as college preparation courses, test preparation workshops, and help with filling out financial aid application forms (Bartolome, 1994).

While program components such as these are necessary for college preparation, they are not sufficient for effectively working with poor and minority youth (Oakes, Quartz, Gong, Guiton, & Lipton, 1993). Thus, this digest, in reviewing essential components of pre-college programs, suggests that they must also attend to the cultural norms of the community and their own political contexts in order to increase students' access to, enrollment in, and graduation from college.

Technical Aspects of Programs

College preparation must begin for students as early as possible, focus on readiness rather than remediation, and provide multiple services over an extended period of time. The technical components of pre-college programs cover the structures, strategies, and knowledge necessary to prepare students for admission, enrollment, and graduation from college.

Structures

The structure of a program comprises its organization, staffing, schedules, services, physical location, and material resources. Because programs are usually created at a local level to meet a local need, they encompass a variety of structures.

Organization and management can take the form of secondary and post-secondary partnerships, community-school collaborations, or whole school reform plans. One example, the Liberty Partnerships Program of New York, offered at sites throughout the state, relies on cooperation between a university or a not-for-profit community organization and a public or private high school with a commitment to education, sociology, and psychology. The program's focus on the whole child results in employment of family-focused social workers, college-focused counselors, and academic-focused support staff. The program requires student participation in after-school programs, in-school tutoring, and summer enrichment and remediation. Another example, the I Have A Dream Foundation (IHAD), originally targeted a specific group of sixth graders in a single school and offered only financial support for future college attendance. Now, IHAD operates in 62 cities in schools, community centers, and inner-city housing projects. A professional staff and volunteers at each site commit to 12 to 15 years of service to a specific cohort of students who are provided with tutoring, mentoring, academic enrichment, cultural and recreational activities, as well as the promise of financial assistance.

Strategies

Strategies are the curricular and teaching methods instructors and program staffs use to provide students with the information and experiences necessary for post-secondary attainment. Like the structures of college preparation programs, strategies vary widely, but usually include some of these: mentoring, tutoring, critical problem solving, test preparation, peer mentoring, direct teaching, individual and group counseling, motivational speakers, college visits and courses, and summer enrichment programs.

Content

Program curriculum, supported by high quality teachers and materials in resource centers, must cover the full range of knowledge needed by college-going students. It commonly provides rigorous academic training in subjects such as algebra, geometry, calculus, biology, chemistry, physics, foreign language, and honors or Advanced Placement English. Curriculum also includes techniques for academic problem solving and test preparation training for the PSAT, SAT, and ACT.

In addition, students need to master non-academic skills. They must be able to form relationships and networks with individuals who have the capacity and commitment to connect them to resources and opportunities: college faculty, prominent business people, corporate leaders, and members of professional associations (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). They must practice their speaking and writing skills, become comfortable in different types of social interactions, and develop the ability to find needed resources in a college environment. Field trips to museums and cultural events, visits to college campuses, mentor pro-

grams, career days, financial aid and admissions workshops, and motivational seminars can all aid in the acquisition of these skills (Hagedorn & Fogel, in press).

Counseling components offer support throughout students' junior and senior high school years as they select courses, prepare college applications, and negotiate the financial aid process. Ideally, programs also offer financial support.

Integration of Cultural Factors into Programs

Jun and Tierney (1999) caution that a "cookie cutter" approach to college preparation comprised solely of technical components is not enough. Students' cultural beliefs and norms must be integrated into program curriculum, teaching strategies, and educational resources, and they must be built upon in a positive manner (Jun & Tierney, 1999; Knight, Newton, & Oesterreich, 2000).

The Neighborhood Academic Initiative (NAI), for example, assumes that student success is directly connected to the student's local neighborhood contexts. Operating in an area of Southern California where social problems such as drug use, crime, and unemployment dominate the news, college preparation programs might be inclined to remove students from their community in the belief that the environment is an impediment to learning. NAI, conversely, assumes that learning will occur only if families and neighborhoods are connected to schooling and college preparation and, therefore, focuses on the strengths of its students, their families, and the environments in which they live (Tierney & Jun, n.d.).

At a New York City Liberty Partnership Program site in a predominantly Dominican community center, strong traditions of *familismo* permeate the program, with family members, staff, and students drawn together into kinship-like relationships. Thus, parents expect the staff to advocate as *comadres* (co-parents) to phone the schools, talk with counselors, monitor student grades, and navigate the school system. Similarly, at Frederick Douglass Academy in New York City, a contemporary segregated African American school, a whole school reform effort focused on college preparation emerges out of the black traditions of collective survival, racial uplift, and connectedness. Students are taught to respect each other and work together for the uplifting of the African American community through close-knit relationships with staff (Knight et al., 2000).

The Political Context of Programs

The complexities inherent in implementing effective precollege programs are augmented by both internal and external politics. Program policies and practices must be sensitive to the agendas and concerns of the government and private agencies that fund, license, and/or host them. They must also respond to the sometimes conflicting goals and priorities of individuals with a stake in them: administrators and teachers, community members, parents, and the students themselves (Knight & Oesterreich, in press; Oakes et al., 1993).

Further, college preparation is framed by shifting trends in college admissions, affirmative and anti-affirmative action legislation, changing patterns of funding from the national to the state level, and more stringent high school graduation requirements. For example, when the City University of New York opted to end remediation and require students to pass three entrance exams to attend its four-year colleges, preparation programs responded with special test preparation and tutoring for the three exams. And recent trends of using college preparation programs as bridges between secondary and post-secondary institutions, thereby extending their presence to college campuses, has provoked questions about which institution has decision-making authority. Groups on every level of the college preparation process argue for desirable outcomes and the means to achieve them, while also trying to protect their own interests.

Conclusion

College preparation programs working to bridge the racial and economic gaps in the college admittance, attendance, and graduation rates must recognize the multiple factors impacting on their efforts and on students' lives. College preparation is more than a series of well-orchestrated mechanical and sequential services; it is an inherently complex and value-laden process. Attention must be paid to the inextricably intertwined technical, cultural, and political components to create not only well-intentioned but also well planned and implemented programs which can change the landscape of post-secondary attainment for minority youth from low-income neighborhoods.

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This Digest was developed by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. ED-99-CO-0035. The opinions in this Digest do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.

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